

The Association Between Emotion Regulation Skills and School Violence Among Lower Secondary School Students

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ABSTRACT

School violence is a concern for student well-being, particularly during early adolescence, when emotional development, peer relationships, and academic pressures intersect. This study examined the associations between three components of emotion regulation skills—emotion recognition, cognitive reappraisal, and control of impulsive responses—and school-violence behaviours among lower secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted with 372 students in Grades 6–9 from six schools (four public and two non-public). Convenience sampling was combined with stratification by grade and gender. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple linear regression. All three emotion-regulation components were negatively correlated with school-violence behaviours. In the regression model, emotion recognition ($\beta = -0.21$), cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -0.26$), and control of impulsive responses ($\beta = -0.43$) were statistically significant predictors (all $p < .001$). The model explained 42% of the variance in school-violence behaviours ($R^2 = .42$). Control of impulsive responses showed the strongest association in the model. These findings suggest that school-based prevention may benefit from helping students recognise emotions, reinterpret stressful situations, and pause before acting during interpersonal conflict. However, the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data preclude causal conclusions, and the geographically concentrated sample limits generalisability. Further research should validate the measures and examine individual and contextual factors using multiple data sources.

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Introduction

School violence is a major concern in education and child and adolescent mental health worldwide. Beyond threatening physical safety, it is associated with adverse psychological, academic, and social outcomes. These concerns are particularly salient in early adolescence, a developmental period marked by substantial changes in emotional experience and social behaviour (Olweus, 1993; UNESCO, 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). School violence can include direct physical aggression as well as relational forms, such as social exclusion, ridicule, the circulation of harmful information, and psychological pressure within peer groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Digital communication and social media may further complicate these behaviours by extending peer conflict beyond face-to-face interactions.

In Vietnam, school violence remains an important concern for educators and communities. Students may experience academic pressure, emotional distress, and difficulties in peer

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relationships without always having the psychosocial skills needed to manage these challenges effectively (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022; UNICEF Viet Nam, 2021). Understanding psychological factors associated with school-violence behaviours is therefore relevant to both research and educational practice.

Emotion regulation is one potential correlate of students' responses to interpersonal stress. The present study examined the associations between three components of emotion regulation skills—emotion recognition, cognitive reappraisal, and control of impulsive responses—and school-violence behaviours among lower secondary school students. It also considers the implications of the findings for school-based emotional education in Vietnam. Given the cross-sectional design, the study addresses statistical associations and predictive relationships rather than causal effects.

Literature Review

Emotion regulation skills in lower secondary school students

Emotion regulation refers to processes through which individuals identify, evaluate, and modify emotional responses in ways that support adaptation to situational demands (Gross, 1998). It is not simply the suppression of emotion; rather, it involves flexible coordination among cognition, emotional experience, and behaviour (Thompson, 2011). Gross's process model identifies different points at which emotions can be regulated. Cognitive reappraisal, in particular, involves changing how a situation is interpreted and can influence subsequent emotional and behavioural responses (Gross & John, 2003). Recognising one's emotional state is also important because it can help an individual select an appropriate response to stress or interpersonal conflict.

During early adolescence, emotional and social demands can intensify while behavioural self-regulation is still developing (Siegel, 2014; Steinberg, 2014). Students may therefore be more likely to react impulsively in situations involving peer conflict, group pressure, or perceived humiliation. In the Vietnamese cultural context, social expectations concerning harmony and public self-control may shape how young people express negative emotions. However, limited outward expression should not automatically be interpreted as effective regulation: unresolved distress may also be expressed indirectly, for example through exclusion, online ridicule, or rumours (Lê Minh Công, 2020).

School violence and its manifestations among lower secondary school students

School violence encompasses behaviours that cause physical or psychological harm within the school environment or in relationships connected with school (Olweus, 1993). Contemporary understandings extend beyond physical fights to include social exclusion, psychological intimidation, the spread of harmful information, and online aggression. Relational aggression, for example, can be used to damage peer relationships or social standing (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Among lower secondary school students, such behaviours may intersect with developmental changes, the desire for peer acceptance, and sensitivity to social evaluation.

Academic expectations, family pressures, and competition at school may contribute to students' psychological stress. When distress persists without adequate support, interpersonal conflict and aggressive responses may become more likely. Social media also changes how peer aggression is enacted and experienced, potentially making some incidents less visible to adults

and more difficult to contain. These contextual factors indicate that school violence should not be understood solely as an individual behavioural problem.

The association between emotion regulation and school violence

Previous research has linked emotion regulation difficulties with aggression and behavioural problems in children and adolescents (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Robertson et al., 2012). Students who can identify and regulate their emotions may be better able to avoid impulsive or hostile responses when faced with peer conflict. Cognitive reappraisal may help individuals interpret a situation as less threatening, reducing the likelihood of anger-driven confrontation (Gross & John, 2003). Conversely, difficulty controlling immediate responses may be associated with acting quickly without considering consequences.

The association between emotion regulation and school violence is also likely to be shaped by context. Classroom climate, teacher support, family relationships, and peer-group norms may influence whether students can apply regulation skills during conflict (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Developing individual skills may therefore be helpful, but sustained prevention may also require supportive school and social environments.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, this study treats emotion regulation skills as predictors and school-violence behaviours as the outcome. The three components examined are emotion recognition, cognitive reappraisal, and control of impulsive responses. The original conceptual framework also proposed school-environment support as a moderator; however, the methods and results reported in the source manuscript do not describe a measure or statistical test for this moderator. This issue requires author confirmation before submission.

H1: Emotion regulation skills are negatively associated with school-violence behaviours.

H2: Emotion recognition is negatively associated with school-violence behaviours.

H3: Control of emotional responses is negatively associated with school-violence behaviours.

H4: Support from the school environment moderates the association between emotion regulation skills and school-violence behaviours.

The proposed framework assumes that students who recognise, reappraise, and regulate their emotional responses more effectively will report fewer school-violence behaviours. Support from teachers, peers, and the classroom environment was hypothesised to weaken the association between difficulties in emotion regulation and school violence; this moderation hypothesis cannot be evaluated from the analyses reported here.

Methodology

Research design and study area

A quantitative cross-sectional survey was used to examine associations between emotion regulation skills and school-violence behaviours among lower secondary school students. Data were collected from six schools in the former Thu Dau Mot city area, described in the source manuscript as now part of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Population, sampling, and sample size

The sample comprised 372 students in Grades 6–9 from six lower secondary schools: four public schools and two non-public schools. Convenience sampling was combined with

stratification by grade and gender to support a balanced sample. Participation was subject to agreement from the schools, parents or guardians, and students.

Research instruments

Emotion regulation skills

Emotion regulation skills were assessed across three components: emotion recognition, cognitive reappraisal, and control of impulsive responses. Survey items were adapted with reference to literature on emotion regulation (Gross, 1998, 2015) and linguistically adjusted for the school experiences and developmental characteristics of Vietnamese lower secondary school students. Items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores were intended to indicate stronger emotion regulation skills.

School-violence behaviours

School-violence behaviours were assessed using items covering direct and indirect aggression, including threats, social exclusion, ridicule, and the spread of harmful information. The items were developed with reference to work on bullying and relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olweus, 1993) and adapted to the Vietnamese lower secondary school context. Participants self-reported the frequency or level of their own behaviours using a five-point Likert response scale. The source manuscript does not provide the full item wording or response anchors for this scale.

Reliability and validity

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, alongside a theoretical review of the measurement constructs. Items were reviewed for clarity and age appropriateness. Confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted; consequently, the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales in this cultural context has not been established by the analyses reported in this study.

Data collection and ethical considerations

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires with support from teachers responsible for the relevant classes and the research team. Before the survey, students were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to decline to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. Anonymity was emphasised, and students were told that their personal information would not be used for school disciplinary purposes. As the measures relied entirely on self-report, responses may have been affected by social desirability, particularly for behaviours considered unacceptable in school.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise sample characteristics and study variables. Pearson correlation analysis examined the direction and strength of bivariate associations. Multiple linear regression was then used to estimate the relative associations of the three emotion regulation components with school-violence behaviours. The source manuscript reports Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlation coefficients, standardised regression coefficients, model R^2 , the F statistic, p values, and variance inflation factors (VIFs).

Results

Sample characteristics

Table 1. *Characteristics of the study sample (N = 372)*

Characteristic	Public schools, n (%)	Non-public schools, n (%)	Total, n
Male	96 (50.0)	88 (48.9)	184
Female	96 (50.0)	92 (51.1)	188
Grade 6	47 (24.5)	44 (24.4)	91
Grade 7	49 (25.5)	47 (26.1)	96
Grade 8	48 (25.0)	44 (24.4)	92
Grade 9	48 (25.0)	45 (25.0)	93
Total	192 (51.6)	180 (48.4)	372 (100.0)

Source: Authors.

Of the 372 participants, 192 (51.6%) attended public schools and 180 (48.4%) attended non-public schools. Gender distribution was broadly balanced in both school groups. Students in Grades 6–9 were also distributed relatively evenly, with each grade accounting for approximately one-quarter of the sample.

Scale reliability

Table 2. *Internal consistency of the study scales*

	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Emotion recognition	5	0.81
Cognitive reappraisal	5	0.84
Control of impulsive responses	6	0.87
School-violence behaviours	7	0.85

Source: Authors.

All four scales had Cronbach's alpha coefficients above .80, indicating good internal consistency in this sample. These estimates support proceeding with the reported analyses, although they do not by themselves establish construct validity.

Descriptive statistics

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics for the study variables*

Study variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Emotion recognition	62	.71	1.20	.00
Cognitive reappraisal	48	.75	1.00	.00
Control of impulsive responses	31	.82	1.00	.00
School-violence behaviours	11	.69	1.00	.60

Source: Authors.

Mean scores indicated moderate to moderately high levels across the three emotion regulation components. Emotion recognition had the highest mean, whereas control of impulsive responses had the lowest. The mean score for school-violence behaviours was relatively low, although the results suggest that such behaviours were still reported by some students.

Pearson correlations

Table 4. *Pearson correlations among study variables*

1. Emotion recognition	1			
2. Cognitive reappraisal	.52**	1		
3. Control of impulsive responses	.49**	.58**	1	
4. School-violence behaviours	-.41**	-.46**	-.57**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Source: Authors

All three emotion regulation components were negatively and significantly correlated with school-violence behaviours. Control of impulsive responses showed the largest absolute correlation ($r = -.57$, $p < .01$), suggesting that stronger control of immediate emotional responses was associated with fewer reported school-violence behaviours. Because the study was cross-sectional, these correlations should not be interpreted as evidence of direct causal relationships.

Multiple linear regression

Table 5. *Multiple linear regression predicting school-violence behaviours*

	β	t	p	VIF
Emotion recognition	-0.21	-3.84	< .001	1.42
Cognitive reappraisal	-0.26	-4.51	< .001	1.56
Control of impulsive responses	-0.43	-7.28	< .001	1.61

Note. $R^2 = .42$; $F = 88.64$; $p < .001$.

Source: Authors

The regression model was statistically significant, $F = 88.64$, $p < .001$, and the three emotion regulation components jointly accounted for 42% of the variance in school-violence behaviours ($R^2 = .42$). Control of impulsive responses had the largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$), followed by cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$) and emotion recognition ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$). All VIF values were below 2, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a substantial concern in this model. The remaining 58% of variance may be associated with factors not included in the model, such as family environment, academic pressure, classroom climate, peer norms, and students' personal experiences.

Discussion

The findings indicate that all three measured components of emotion regulation were negatively associated with school-violence behaviours among the participating lower secondary school students. This pattern is broadly consistent with previous research linking emotion regulation difficulties to aggression and behavioural problems in children and adolescents (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Robertson et al., 2012). Among the predictors, control of impulsive responses showed the strongest association with school-violence behaviours. One possible interpretation is that students who struggle to pause and regulate immediate responses may be more likely to react aggressively during peer conflict. This interpretation is plausible in light of developmental accounts emphasising that self-regulatory capacities continue to develop during adolescence (Steinberg, 2014), but the present design cannot establish the direction of influence.

Emotion recognition and cognitive reappraisal were also significant predictors in the regression model. Recognising emotional states may help students identify escalating distress, while reappraisal may allow them to interpret a provocative situation in a less threatening way. These skills may be useful components of school-based efforts to help students respond constructively to everyday disagreement. However, the study used adapted questionnaire items and did not conduct confirmatory factor analysis; therefore, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding the validity of the measures.

The results also support a contextual rather than exclusively individual interpretation of school violence. The model explained 42% of the observed variance, leaving a substantial proportion unexplained. Family relationships, academic demands, classroom safety, teacher–student relationships, and peer-group norms may all be relevant. Previous social-ecological approaches to bullying prevention similarly emphasise the role of interpersonal and environmental conditions (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Because the present study did not report a statistical test of school-environment support as a moderator, it cannot determine whether such support changes the strength of the association between emotion regulation and school violence.

The findings have practical implications for schools. Psychological support should not be limited to responding after a violent incident; it may also include helping students recognise emotions and practise managing reactions during routine stressful situations. Emotional learning activities could be integrated into homeroom sessions, civic education, experiential learning, or life-skills programmes rather than delivered only as a separate programme requiring additional resources. Scenario-based activities—such as responding to peer ridicule online, managing anger during disagreement, or coping with exclusion—may help students connect skills with familiar experiences. At the same time, individual skill development should be accompanied by efforts to create psychologically safe classrooms and accessible support pathways.

Several limitations should be considered. The cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference. Self-reported behaviour may be affected by social desirability, particularly when respondents report behaviours that violate school norms. The sample was drawn from six schools in a geographically concentrated area, limiting generalisability to all lower secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City or Vietnam. Finally, although internal consistency was acceptable, construct validity was not examined through confirmatory factor analysis, and the proposed moderating role of school-environment support was not tested.

Conclusion

In this sample of 372 lower secondary school students, emotion recognition, cognitive reappraisal, and control of impulsive responses were each negatively associated with school-violence behaviours. Control of impulsive responses had the strongest association in the multivariable regression model, and the three components together explained 42% of the variance in the outcome. These findings suggest that emotional skills are relevant to understanding students' school-violence behaviours, but they should not be treated as the sole explanation for a complex, context-dependent phenomenon.

In Vietnam, school-based prevention may benefit from combining support for students' emotional skills with improvements in the psychosocial school environment and efforts to reduce persistent stressors. Future studies should recruit more geographically diverse samples, use multiple informants or data sources, validate the measurement structure through confirmatory

factor analysis, and measure and test contextual variables—including school-environment support directly.

Recommendations

Schools may consider incorporating practical emotion-regulation activities into existing teaching and student-support structures, with particular attention to recognising emotional escalation and managing impulsive responses during peer conflict. Prevention strategies should also strengthen supportive teacher–student relationships, promote psychologically safe classroom climates, and provide students with clear routes to seek help. These recommendations should be evaluated in future intervention studies rather than assumed to be effective on the basis of cross-sectional associations alone.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The source manuscript does not report a research dataset. The evidence base consists of the literature cited in the manuscript.

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